



## KEN IRBY (1936 - )

Ken Irby is a Kansas poet who practices projective verse, a form based on physical acts of speechmaking rather than British poetics. Charles Olson of Black Mountain College (1930s-1950s) taught that a line should be the length of a breath. In poetry like Irby's, the words match human consciousness rather than creating a facsimile of reality. This "open field" style may suggest prose of William Faulkner or James Joyce more than Shakespeare's sonnets.

Irby was not a student at Black Mountain, but he has had contacts with Black Mountain poets throughout his career. This direction in American writing connects to experimental forms now loosely called "Language" poetry. Ed Dorn, a former visiting professor at the University of Kansas, was a student of Olson and close friend of Irby. In this elegy, written at Dorn's death, Irby displaces his emotional grief with an image of farm animals in a bare pasture. The title's season is near solstice, the darkest, most mysterious time of year, and also a time when losses are most sharply seen.

This poem begins with the animals viewed at a distance, as though they are almost beyond sight. The narrator sees them skewed by the distance—and also perhaps by grief—so that they appear to be performing on hind legs, "a real dog and pony show." Irby sets this familiar term amongst the more bizarre appearances of the domestic animals. Just when it seems he might explain himself and the soundless "musicians at the window," he changes direction. He shifts from visual images to sounds—the rhyme between "cray" and "they." The second section also shifts from animals to plants: "hedge apples" (or osage oranges) at pasture boundary and "night winter cray bushes." Rather than resolve the poem with a resounding click, he opens it up to new questions.

[For Ed Dorn -2 Apr 1929 - 10 Dec 1999]

in the far back pasture animals have lined up in lament  
dog goat pony horse and beyond them

a cow in its astronomical agility  
a real dog and pony show  
giving tribute back on their hind legs  
musicians at the window  
lacking the cock his call  
the show of the world

along the fence rows in with the hedge apples  
the night winter cray bushes are in bloom.  
the cray? what are they?  
that is their rhyme

Education: Kenneth Irby, born in Bowie, Texas, was raised in Ft. Scott, Kansas. He received an A.M. from Harvard University and M.L.S. from the University of California-Berkeley.

Career: Irby is an English professor at the University of Kansas. He has been a Visiting Professor at the University of Copenhagen. He has awards from the Fund for Poetry and the Gertrude Stein Awards in Innovative American Poetry.

His books include: *Studies* (First Intensity Press 2001), *Ridge to Ridge* (Other Wind Press 2001), *Call Steps* (Station Hill Press 1992), *A Set* (Tansy 1983), *Orexis* (Station Hill Press 1981), *Catalpa* (Tansy 1972), *To Max Douglas* (Tansy 1971).

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